

IMPACT OF ACCEPTANCE OF HOMOSEXUALS ON USAF ACADEMY

ASSUMPTIONS:

Formal acceptance of homosexuals would be marked by the enactment of legislation which prohibits discrimination against individuals based solely on homosexual orientation or behaviors (if conducted in private between consenting adults).

- Lewd public behavior, predatory sexual behavior directed at children, sexual harassment, and similar behaviors will continue to be incompatible with military service.
- Homosexuals already exist within the military including the Cadet Wing and current faculty and staff at the Academy.
- AIDS as a medical condition will continue to be grounds for denial of enlistment or discharge from the service. (Although this has been traditionally seen as a "gay" disease, the rapid spread of AIDS among adolescent heterosexuals is likely to put all sexually active cadets at risk.)
- Even with the acceptance of gays in the military, the total number of openly gay members of the Cadet Wing will remain extremely small due to informal social pressure or fear of retribution or discrimination.

IMPACT

As is true of the military in general, nearly the entire spectrum of beliefs and attitudes concerning homosexuality is currently represented among Academy personnel. Although very few individuals are openly campaigning for inclusion of gays, a very large number of military members appear to have adopted a "wait and see" attitude. An outspoken minority is actively and adamantly fighting against any changes to the current ban on gays in the military. Individuals in this latter group are likely to be the ones most impacted by the acceptance of homosexuals because their religious beliefs preclude compromise, personal acceptance, or even toleration of a behavior and orientation they consider to be sinful. Some members of this group may resign or retire in recognition that their beliefs will preclude them from "well and faithfully discharging their assigned duties" (viz., to actively integrate and lead homosexuals). Other members of this group, fueled by propaganda produced by religious extremists, will remain but form pockets of resistance. Both overt challenges (e.g., the distribution of anti-gay literature, display of bumper stickers, and explicit comments) as well as covert actions (e.g., "blanket parties" or subtle forms of discrimination or harassment) are likely to persist as long as they are tolerated by the institution. Potentially, the activities of this group will have a far more deleterious effect on morale and discipline than any behaviors by the small number of homosexuals who may enter the Academy or choose to come out of the closet.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

Although there are clear differences between the integration of homosexuals and the integration of blacks and women, there is a great deal to be learned from our success in these other areas. As with blacks, much of the resistance to gays is based on stereotypes and ignorance. The group most strongly opposed to the integration of gays is comprised of those who do not know any homosexuals. The initial phase of integration must involve education and an opportunity for direct dialog between those in the military and members of the gay community. There might be a great advantage to inviting gay veterans to meet and discuss issues and answer questions. Identifying and tasking gays currently in the military to openly participate in such groups would be ill advised.

As a part of this educational effort, considerable resources are likely to be required to counter the propaganda blitz likely to be orchestrated by religious extremists. It will be necessary to first listen and understand the arguments and evidence they present, and then systematically refute those aspects of their arguments which misrepresent or misconstrue the bulk of the biological, psychological, and sociological evidence. Groups within professional organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, the American Sociological Society, the Anti-Defamation League, and many others could provide expert advice and substantial counterarguments.

Another part of the initial education effort must involve emphasizing the leadership necessity of treating others with dignity and respect. The advantages of developing "learning organizations" where individual authenticity, open communication, and appreciation of diversity enhance effectiveness and adaptability should also be stressed. Bigotry is much more likely to pose an impediment to combat readiness and effectiveness in the future than the particular sexual orientation or private practices of individual soldiers.

Although the institution should never take on the role of becoming "thought police," it will be very important to establish and enforce standards of professional conduct. It was only when Air Force regulations clearly stated that those who discriminated against racial minorities "by act or inference" were unfit to command or lead that confederate flags, "nigger" jokes, and other racist artifacts were generally abandoned. Our first efforts should be toward education; however, those who put their personal negative beliefs about homosexuals above the performance of their professional duties will eventually have to be separated from the service.

There is some evidence that the above approach will allow the Academy and the military to transition through the initial turmoil relatively quickly. The experiences of many similar organizations, (e.g., police and fire departments and foreign militaries) suggest that in a relatively short time a "business as usual" attitude will be reestablished. Even with the enactment of legislation and a general education and awareness program, it is likely that most gays in the military will "wait and see" how the climate changes, and only then cautiously "pick and choose" those to whom they reveal their sexual orientation.

For the past 12 years as part of Behavioral Sciences 360, Introduction to Sociology, we've included public discussions with a panel of gays from the local community. Recently, a reverend from the Metropolitan Community Church, a Christian church which ministers to the gay community, their friends, and family has been a regular member of the panel. This year's panel also included a lesbian who was a staff sergeant in the New Mexico National Guard. The exchanges and discussion with the 50+ cadets who attended were frank and forthright, and the general effect appeared to be a significant increase in awareness and acceptance. As one cadet put it to the panel-- "you don't look at all like the Village People." Since that discussion, several heterosexual male cadets have even expressed the view that, for them, rooming with a homosexual would not be a problem. Extravagant claims concerning insurmountable problems with sleeping arrangements appear to be greatly overstated.

The bottom line is that we will deal with the integration of gays into the military as we have dealt with other challenges presented to us in the past: with integrity, consistency, and consummate professionalism. The duty concept at the Academy is strong; working together to find the best way to integrate gays will be painful for many and likely to pose unique and unforeseen problems for us all, but we can succeed. As an institution, we may well emerge from a difficult transitional period with even greater dedication and commitment to serve in the defense of our nation.